

Christ Presbyterian Church
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Elemental: The Burning Bush | Exodus 3

As I mentioned in the announcements today, we're in the summer series entitled Elemental: God All Around Us, and so far we've looked at the idea that God is everywhere in nature. Two weeks ago, David Hammond talked about a transcendent God, a distant God, an omnipotent God that we humans cannot get our minds around. A God that's beyond our comprehension, that no human mind can fathom. This transcendent, distant God is imminent. He comes to us in a very real way. He comes to us in creation: in the storms, and the winds, and the rains, and the lightning, in the sunrise and sunsets, and the mountains, and lakes, and the ocean, and the forest, and the celestial sky. He comes close to us in His creation, and He becomes real to us. See, in all of creation, we see the handiwork and the majesty of God; we see the creative character of God. Last week John talked to us about the land, about the soil and the dirt we live on—a farm, a garden—and that God has given us the dirt because we receive the promise of His blessing as we stand on the land, and we're to become stewards of the land.

Now, this morning we're going to talk about fire. And I have a question for you . . . who doesn't love a good fire? Whether it's a fire from hard wood, or natural gas, or propane, there is something so wonderful and beautiful about fire. Whether it's a fire pit in your backyard at your cabin, a long Gitche Gumee, the reality is there's something about a fire. Many of us have experienced great memories around a campfire. For me, I think about the many times I've sat next to a fire circle in the Boundary Waters, stoking that fire all night and witnessing the glory of the Aurorae Borealis, the Northern Lights, dancing across the sky. And how about the smell? The smell of a fire is amazing! I've thought about bottling it and selling it during the winter—Chanel No. Fire or whatever. But, who doesn't love to play with fire? I mean, we've all stuck a poker or a stick in the fire. And then with that red amber at the end of the stick you can actually write your name in the air in the darkness, and when it burns out, you can use the charcoal to draw stick figures on a rock. It's amazing. And how about this . . . just a little bit of a diversion, it'd be rare for me to take a diversion, but fires were meant to roast marshmallows, the emphasis on roast. See, God never intended this creative thing, a marshmallow, to be thrust into a fire impatiently letting it become a torch. God never intended for a marshmallow to be burnt to ashes and then eaten afterward like you're eating an ashtray. Who does that to a marshmallow? Let me see your hands. That is sacrilegious! You people need help. See a therapist doggone it. That's the worst thing in the world. Marshmallows were created to be golden brown. They were created to be gooey, and warm, and sticky, not like a bunch of ashes.

We also know that fire can be destructive, and it's dangerous. About fourteen years ago, three blocks from the church, a large apartment complex of over fifty people had a

horrible fire. It took five communities to put it out. All of the folks were brought here on busses that night. Fire Chaplin Jon Good and I, as police Chaplin, we brought all of the folks on busses here to the church in the middle of the night. We made soup and we gave them great hospitality. The cool thing was, and John Crosby doesn't know this, but people brought their pets. It was great. The Great Room was full of dogs and cats running around, it was total chaos. And you know what grew out of that? A burning bush moment because a guy in our church, Ross Robinson, Ross Safarian I call him, Ross encountered God that night and he got the idea that we should collect linens, and toiletries, and paper towels and toilet paper for these folks. And he had us announce it that morning and Ross filled up his trailer ten times with sheets and with towels. That was a holy, but destructive moment.

The Bible is full of images of fire. We know that the Israelites wandered through the desert and they were able to wander at night because of a pillar of fire. They traveled at night and they were illumined in the darkness by the warmth and the comfort of the pillar of fire. It was God's provision. It was a miraculous phenomenon that never left its place in front of the Israelites. It wasn't stoked by wood or by natural gas. It was a miracle. It was a reminder of God's faithfulness. You see, the Bible is full of these images of fire. We speak of God's wrath as a fire. We speak of God cleansing and purifying us with a burning fire. In fire we see the display of God's power. We see God's imminence coming down. So, in the first chapter of Exodus, we're going to look at the Book of Exodus this morning, but the reality is this: the first five books of the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament are called the Septuagint, and let's do it together . . . what are those? Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. It's been awhile since my intro to the Old Testament Bible. But the reality is that in this first chapter in the Book of Exodus we learn about the cruel oppression of the Israelites; that the Egyptians have them under siege and in captivity. And what's happening in the first chapter is that God is still blessing the Israelites and the Egyptians are threatened by that. They fear the Israelites and so they enslave them and treat them brutally. Now, in the first chapter, Pharaoh orders every first-born male born to a Hebrew woman be killed immediately after birth.

In the second chapter, we hear a story about one particular Hebrew baby, this guy named Moses. And his name literally means he was drawn out of the water. We know that Moses was spared by the quick thinking of his parents. His mother puts him in a basket, rubs tree sap around the basket, and places him in the reeds of the River Nile. He was found, and raised in the palace, and his mother was the one that raised him. Eventually Moses turns back to his people, and he witnesses the beating of one of his people by an Egyptian soldier. And so Moses, who's got an anger problem . . . what does he do? He kills the soldier and then he has to flee because now Pharaoh wants Moses killed. So Moses flees, and he meets a Midianite priest, a distant relative. He marries and settles down and becomes a shepherd. That brings us to chapter 3 this morning; it gets us up to this moment. I'm going to read for you from Chapter 3 verses 1-15. Follow with me on the screens.

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a burning bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³ So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." ⁴ When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." ⁵ "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ Then He said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. ⁷ The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of My people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. ⁸ So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey (the land that we talked about last week)—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ⁹ And now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. ¹⁰ So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring My people the Israelites out of Egypt." ¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹² And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain." ¹³ Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.' "This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation." May God add a blessing to the readings of Jesus' holy word, amen. [Exodus 3:1-15]

One day Moses is walking in the wilderness, tending his sheep. It's a day like many other days, and Moses has been doing this for forty years, but this day would start a new chapter in his life. This day, and this experience, would redefine who Moses was. On this day, Moses encountered something that would forever change his life. Moses finds a burning bush, a bush on fire, an ordinary bush and yet, an extraordinary fire. But, the bush is not consumed; it's not burned to ashes. Moses is drawn with curiosity to see this, and he moves closer. See, God uses this burning bush to get his attention, and if the bush isn't enough, God starts talking to Moses through the bush. The moral is this: when God gets your attention, pay attention! God got Moses's attention. He speaks to Moses and He calls him by name, not once but twice, "Moses, Moses." Now, he thinks, how does this burning bush know my name? He responds, "It is me, I am here, I am

here.” And God tells him not to come any closer, but take off his sandals because he’s standing on holy ground. See, Moses encounters the transcendent God. He encounters this awesome God, whose holiness is beyond his comprehension; He’s the God who’s come down in this moment in a burning bush to speak to Moses. Moses is overcome by the awesomeness and the holiness of God, and he knows he could die if he looks in the face of God, so he falls and he covers his face. Why? Because he’s standing on holy ground. He’s overcome. I’m sure he’s shaking. He’s freaked out by the holiness of God, by the power that’s in his midst right now that will forever reshape and reboot his life.

See, the God of the burning bush, He’s the God of the covenant and He’s kept that covenant promise. He reminds Moses of the promises that He made to his forefather, Abraham. And He reiterated that promise to Isaac, and to Jacob, and now to Moses. See, it’s not a new promise. The God of the burning bush, the covenant keeper, it’s an old promise. See, He’s the God of Israel who has come down once again; He’s come down for us in Jesus. The God of the burning bush is a compassionate God. He’s the God that tells Moses He’s seen the misery and the persecution of His people and He’s going to do something about it. He tells Moses, *I’m going to keep My promise because I’ve come down to rescue them. I’ve come down to rescue them through you, Moses, through you. To rescue them from their oppression, to bring them into a spacious new land, the land of blessing, and of milk and honey. See Moses, I want you to step up and lead. I want you to lead My people and I want you to go to that Pharaoh guy, yeah, I know he’s one of the most powerful, popular guys on the earth right now, but I want you to go to him and defy him. I want you to stand up to him and I want you to lead My people to freedom.* At this moment Moses is called by God. He’s been commissioned by God. He’s commissioned by God to do a work. See, God has manifested Himself in a very real way to Moses and now He attempts to manifest Himself through Moses’ response. And what’s Moses’ response? A litany of objections and excuses. Litanies of objections and excuses because he’s not the man for the job. He says to God, *Who am I? Who am I? I’m a nobody, I’m a fugitive, I’m a murderer, I’m living in exile, I’m chasing sheep. You’ve got the wrong number. You’ve got the wrong guy! Choose someone else.* But see, God already knows about Moses. He’s not looking for Charlton Heston, that chiseled, tan Moses figure. He’s not looking for Charlton Heston; He’s looking for a real hero, not a perfect one, because they don’t exist. See, God wants ordinary people like you and me who will trust this ordinary guy. Ordinary people that will trust this extraordinary God who will do extraordinary things through us like He did to Moses. But in chapter four, Moses protests again. He says *I don’t have the gifts, I don’t talk very well, I’m slow in speech and tongue, I’ve got a stuttering problem, I won’t know what to say. Don’t get your hopes up with me God. I am what I am.*

Growing up, my best friend Mark Evogen lived two doors down. Mark Evogen was completely deaf. Markie could talk a little bit, but it was a muffled, funny sounding voice. He couldn’t hear sounds, but Markie could read lips. We played football, and baseball, and hockey together. He was a gifted athlete, but Markie could only communicate with

his hands and a few words that were hard to understand, but this guy responded to God's call on his life. Markie is a disciplined follower of Jesus. He gets up every morning to pray, and he's living a sacrificial life; he's a leader in the deaf community. He's a sacrificial lover, I've witnessed it. I look up to him, and many people look up to him as family and friends, but Markie can't speak. He's been to this church, but see, Markie means what he says and he says what he means with very few words. Is Markie up for the call? Are you up for the call? Am I up for the call?

God tells Moses, *I know all about you, I know your inadequacies and your weaknesses, but it doesn't matter. You know why? Because I will be with you. It's going to be you and Me, Moses, together. Trust Me.* And then Moses asks this question, "Who are you?" though he knows full well that it's God speaking to him. He asks, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and I say the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac has sent me, and they ask me what's his name, what should I tell them?" God told Moses, "I AM who I AM. You tell them that I AM has sent you."

John Ortberg says it this way. He says: *I am the God who wants to be known and I am the God who has heard you when no one else thought I was listening and I am the God who saw the misery of my people when no one thought I was looking. I knew you Moses when you were a baby in the reeds, and I knew you in the desert as a fugitive, and now I have come. I AM the God who comes down, so Moses, get your hopes up. Get your hopes up, Moses, because I AM who I AM.*

So now the real question . . . the real question that comes to us this morning . . . have you had a burning bush experience? Have you encountered the mystery of God? The power of God in creation whether in a burning bush or a sunrise? In the elements? See, God has come down to you and me, and He's revealed Himself to you and me in the face of another human being. See, it's God calling you by name, Alan. It is God calling you by name, Joyce. It is God calling each one of us this morning. He's calling us to go and serve somebody. And maybe you're somebody who is livestreaming the service this morning right now. And maybe you're someone livestreaming with a terminal illness, I know there are a couple of you out there, that you're slowly leaving this world. And maybe God is calling you from a burning bush to trust Him. To trust Him as you journey home. See, He's saying to you, Pam, and He's saying to you, Don, finish well. Tell everyone thank you. Tell everyone I love you. See, what God is calling for you right now, Pam and Don, and each of us in this room, is to trust Him. God is calling us all. He's calling us to weep with people right now who are weeping. He's calling us to come alongside a person of color who feels profiled, or to come along a police officer who feels undervalued and unappreciated. See, God is calling each of us, whether it's to share in eternal hope with someone—a colleague or friend—or whether it's to tell somebody *I love you* or to ask somebody to forgive you, it is God calling you now to stand up and use your voice to do something! Maybe you're just waiting for a burning bush. Maybe you've just got a whole litany of excuses and objections. Maybe you're

immobilized and filled with fear, so caught up in in deficiencies and your inadequacies and your problems...looking at yourself and saying, *how could I do this for God?* Today we are being told whose we are, and He has come down. He has come down for ordinary people like you and me, and we've got to trust this extraordinary redeemer, Jesus. Jesus who has the power that is more sufficient than us. He has the power to use us beyond our imagination. See, when God gets our attention, we've got to pay attention. You've got to respond, not out of fear, but out of a sense that you can trust this extraordinary God to do some extraordinary things through His ordinary child.

True story that I'll end with this morning. It's a true story that happened in 1976. I was a lead counselor for the third summer in a row at a Christian camp for inner city kids of all colors. And I taught canoeing, and compassing, and map reading skills, and I taught kids how to set up tents and to build fires; the importance of fuel and oxygen and something to ignite the fire. We had just spent two nights on an island in a remote area that we portaged into, and during that time I had two junior counselors with me. The idea was that we were going to put them through the rigors; we were going to see if they remembered what they had learned and be able to do it for themselves. And so we had two junior counselors and twenty-one kids on this island. It was the third year in a row that I had this young guy, Thor, with me. He was one of my junior counselors—he was my shadow, always by my side. Thor had been in my tent for two years and I had gotten to know him really well, and I had spent time with him outside of camp. His full name, honest to God, was Torrance Nado—yeah you got it—Thor Nado. That was his name, Thor Nado, and he was a tornado. He fit this name amazingly well. Thor Nado was a storm waiting to happen. He had four siblings and was raised by a single mom; his dad abandoned the family when he was a baby. Thor was hyperactive and he was always looking for trouble; his M.O. was *I am mad, I am angry, I don't like you and we're going to fight.* I can't tell you how many of Thor Nado's fights I broke up, and I found myself many times saying to myself, why didn't his parents just name him Summer Breeze? Because Thor excelled at being a storm and being angry. At the end of those two days, one of my junior counselors helped me pack up everything. We were loading in the canoes, and I checked with Thor and the other junior counselor and I said, "You made sure that you poured plenty of water on your fire, and you stirred the fire well, right? You felt to see if there were any warm coals?" And they assured me that had happened. We got in the boats and just as we were pulling away, I heard a child scream. "Fire! Fire!" and I looked over at the windward side of the island where Thor had some kids, and I could see the smoke and the flames shooting off. We got out of the boats as fast as we could, we unpacked our cook kits, we grabbed pans and pots, and we formed a line. We filled the Duluth Packs full of water, and we began to fight this fire ourselves, and the whole time we're fighting it, for five hours, I'm literally thinking, one of these kids is going to die in this fire and it's going to be my fault. And all I could think of was, somebody is going to pass out and somebody is going to need oxygen and their lungs are going to be filled with this smoke. And, there was Thor Nado right next to me, my wingman, giving me buckets, and I would just throw them in every direction. I noticed he was

beginning to grow pale, and I could tell he had taken in a lot of smoke, so finally I got a bucket and I was able to throw it at Thor and kind of revive him, and by the grace of God and the power of God we put this fire out. We stood around, our faces full of ashes, and we just cried together, we just wept. All of us were safe and all of us were grateful. We cried. We cried real tears and we prayed. And then I grabbed my Bible and I remembered this passage from Isaiah.

But now, this is what the Lord says—he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are Mine. ²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. ³For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I give Egypt in your ransom, Cush^[a] and Seba in your stead. Why? ⁴Because you are precious and honored in My sight, and because I love you. [Isaiah 43:1-4]

We were exhausted. We went back to camp, had dinner, and went to bed early. In the middle of the night, Thor woke me up. He said he had prayed when we were on that island. He prayed that God would put the fire out, and that he wouldn't be blamed. He prayed and said, “God, if we can do this deal, I want to open my heart to You.” He and I prayed again that night, and we've kept close for many years. He came to stay with me for a weekend at St. John's and I followed him. He graduated from high school, and he went to college (the only one in his family). I lost touch with him after he married and had a few children. The Thor Nado, the storm waiting to happen, opened his arms to this burning bush experience and his life was forever altered. God rescued him and Thor Nado realized it was because he was precious and loved. So, God is calling you this morning. He's calling you to do something. No excuses, no objections because it's not about you . . . It's about trusting an extraordinary God to do something extraordinary through you, an ordinary person.

I'm going to pray a Prayer of Confession for us, and I will periodically stop in my prayer and say, “Lord, hear our prayer” and you will say, “Have mercy on me.” “Lord, hear our prayer”, “Have mercy on me.” Let's pray.

Holy God we come before You this morning, admitting that maybe You've called us in a burning bush and we've turned around and ran. Admitting, God, that our fears have gotten the best of us, I pray this morning, that You would forgive us for times we were too afraid to encounter You and see. Lord, hear our prayer. **[Congregation: Have mercy on us]**. And loving God, we pray that You would forgive us of the excuses that we've made; they've been pretty lame. They're all about us and our inadequacies and not being good enough and not knowing what to say, and we, gracious God, we decided that it was just easier not to show up. It was easier not to care, and so we need to seek Your forgiveness when we didn't trust You. Lord, hear our prayer. **[Congregation: Have mercy on us]**. And holy and gracious God, we are reminded that

many times we think it's about us, we think it's about what we're doing and what we're saying, and we can't seem to remove ourselves from the equation. All we can do is selfishly worry about what others will think, that's part of our human nature, and we do that a lot. So Lord, forgive us for the times when our fears and our desires to please others win out. I ask You, Lord, would you hear our prayer? [**Congregation:** Have mercy on us]. And gracious God, thank You for Your redeeming love, that You not only sacrificed for Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and Moses, and Your people the Israelites, but You came to us in a very real way. Not in a burning bush, but in Your son Jesus, who gave His life for us on the cross. Jesus, who has forgiven us and who reminds us we not only have a victory over sin, but a victory over death. We praise You and thank You this morning for allowing us to be Your children, precious, and for calling us by name, for we are Yours. Help us to trust You more. In Your holy name, amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.