

I have always been in awe of firefighters: the people who run towards fires instead of away from them like the rest of us. These brave men and women have been trained how to fight and ultimately defeat fires. They risk their lives to save us. Our natural human inclination is to run away from fire, and yet if we take a closer look Biblically, we see that God does important work through and with fire.

Last week we began a journey with Jesus during the season of Lent. We began our walk wandering in the wilderness with Jesus. While we were there, we saw Jesus resist numerous temptations and ultimately defeat Satan’s plans.

This week we are continuing to follow Jesus as he gets closer to the cross. Today we find ourselves going back in time to understand how Jesus is the fulfilment of God’s covenant in our lives. This covenant was first made with Abram and it was sealed with smoke and fire.

In our Scripture from Genesis 15, we bear witness to this interesting covenant ritual. God instructs Abram to bring animal sacrifices and cut them in half making a path. Abram follows God’s instructions and waits for God to appear. It is not until darkness falls that God appears in the form of a smoking fire pot and flaming torch and walks through this pathway of death, marking the new life God will bestow on Abram and his family through the gift of land.

In this action, God was responding to Abram’s request to give him a sign that he could trust in God and God’s promises. Here God could have used a rainbow (Moses) or water from a rock (for the Israelites), but God chose to show up in the form of smoke and fire to fulfill Abram’s request for a sign.

Throughout the Old Testament we see that God appears in smoke and fire, leading the Israelites forward to the Promised Land. We know that God first appeared to Moses in a burning bush, and that God led the Israelites through the wilderness in a pillar of cloud (smoke) by day and fire by night.

Through our faith, we see that God also leads us through the fire. Isaiah 43:1-3 reminds us what it means to be claimed by God: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”

We see that God kept God’s word in Daniel 3 when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were sent into the fiery furnace and yet lived due to their faith in God.

All throughout the Bible God has been our Savior, the one who has come to save and redeem us. In Genesis 15 we see God as Savior who made a covenant with Abram through the blood of sacrificed animals and fire. In the Gospels, we see God continues to save us through the blood of our Savior Jesus Christ and the fire of the Holy Spirit.

We are a lot like Abram. We know that we need saving, but we don't know how to go about making that happen. We ask God to provide for us a sign of the covenant. Especially as we enter in the second year of the pandemic, we are desperately looking for signs all around us of the inbreaking of God's kingdom on earth.

We have been invited into this same covenant of Abram through the blood of the new covenant of Jesus Christ. Just as God walked through the path of sacrifice, so did Christ as he made the long journey to the cross.

During the season of Lent, we wander with Christ into the fire of the covenant. We remember who we are; that through our faith in Christ we have been claimed by God. This sign in our lives of this covenant is baptism. Through water we die to our sins and rise to new life with Christ. This is the pattern of Lent: dying to ourselves and rising with Christ on Easter morning.

We die to ourselves and our own wills when we allow God, the Holy fire, to refine us and make us new. In Malachi 3 we hear about God's refining fire that will purify our souls. The season of Lent is a time for God to come into our hearts and separate the sin that is within us from the will of God. In this season, we are refined, and ultimately, we are redeemed.

Purification is not an easy process. It takes time and patience. The refiner watches the fire, makes sure it is at the right temperature. The refiner removes the impurities from the fire, so the final product is pure.

How can we allow God to refine us during this season of Lent? How can we allow God to cleanse our hearts? How can we wander with God in the fire so that we can witness the new life that God brings out of the fire?

One thing we can also focus on together during this season is the ways in which we can embody God's ministry of life. We especially do this through our words and our actions. Although God's ministry of fire is life giving, when fire is placed in the hands of humanity it can do real damage.

James warns us what can happen when we use our words to cause death: “And the tongue is a fire...it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed...but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”¹ In our humanity I think we have all, at one point or another, said things that were harmful to those we love. Our words are powerful.

It was after all through the words of the serpent, that Adam and Eve committed the first sin. Maybe the fires that we have started with our words have not turned into wildfires but are simply smoldering twigs. In this season of Lent, we have the opportunity for God to refine all the words that come out of our mouths, that they may be glorying to God.

This week we are called to examine the words we say to God, others, and ourselves. How we pray matters. How we address God matters. The way that we pray, speak to others, and speak to ourselves can tell us a lot about the state of our souls. Reflecting upon these three areas what is the state of your soul today? Are you feeling happy, angry, afraid, or joyful?

Our words matter because they are how we remain in covenant with God. We are refined and redeemed as we continue to profess, like Romans 10 tells us, that “Jesus Christ is Lord.” How do our lives profess this truth? How do our lives embody our faith in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior?

I invite you this week to spend some time reflecting on your words and perhaps also the words that others say to you. How do words affect us and the people we love?

As the people of God, we have been invited to be part of building up the kingdom of God with our words and actions. As we continue following Jesus Christ to the cross, we realize that Jesus had to endure a lot of hurtful words.

Many people did not understand that he was the Son of God, the Messiah who had come to save us. In our Scripture today from Luke we see the Pharisees telling Jesus that Herod is after him. Perhaps they thought that this threat would make him move through their town more quickly, but Jesus would not be rushed. No words could move Christ from his mission to heal and uplift the lowly.

Today we celebrate that Jesus Christ is the word of God, and that these words always bring us life and not death.

The good news for our lives today is that the word of God refines us, redeems us, and challenges us to speak words of life over others.

This past week, I have been especially convicted and moved to action as I have reflected on Jesus’ wonderful words of life. One of my roles in the conference is to oversee our candidacy summits. These events happen twice a year for those who feel that God is calling them to ministry.

I have now overseen three of these candidacy summits, but this week I came to an interesting conclusion. In this time, I have never personally invited people I know to attend. The Holy Spirit convicted me to use these words of life in my heart with those in whom I have experienced a call to ministry. This week I sought out three people that I have known throughout my ministry and I personally invited them to attend the summit.

Today as we celebrate the covenant that God has bestowed upon us through the gift of Jesus Christ, and we commit together to fulfill our part of the covenant to be the people of God.

We do this when we encourage and support the body of Christ. We do this when we share the good news, own our story of being saved by Jesus Christ with others. We do this when we name the things that take us away from God, these impurities in our lives that bring us shame. We do this when we remember that Christ has already come to redeem the whole world. And finally, we live into God’s covenant when the Holy Spirit burns within us to continue to do the will and work of God.

The Holy Spirit is how God continues to refine us each day. It is God’s voice in our hearts and our heads. The Holy Spirit continues to beckon to us, to follow God’s fire, the light of the world, so that we may also be saved.

So, as we continue to wander with Christ to the cross, may God continue to refine our hearts and embolden us to encourage others to serve. May God start a holy fire within us so that we will be led to respond to God’s covenant every day. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes & Resources: New Interpreter’s Commentaries Vol. I & VII. Abingdon Press.

¹ James 3:6-8.