

## "Brightly Burns the Fire"

Exodus 3:1-10; Acts 2:1-12

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus  
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At one point in the gospels Jesus refers to John the Baptist as a "burning and shining lamp." And that's probably a pretty good description of John, for he preached and taught as if he were on fire. No one could have missed the obvious.

In the movie, *The Apostle*, we meet another man on fire for the Lord. His name is Sonny and the film picks up his story about midway through life.

Robert Duvall stars in this movie and, truthfully, I think should have gotten the Academy Award for his performance. But maybe that's the problem—it doesn't seem like a performance. Duvall becomes Sonny. Some actors are just so good that they don't appear to be acting at all. It's like watching a documentary where the central character is a real person. Noteworthy is the fact that Duvall also directed the movie from a script he wrote himself.

He explains about how all this came about in an article from *Guideposts* magazine. Devall writes: "I wasn't getting anywhere with Hollywood [in having my movie produced], yet my work on the story filled my soul. One Sunday in New York I visited six churches, ending up at Harlem's vast Abyssinian Baptist Church.

"There in a packed congregation before a huge choir, when we sang, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," I found myself connected to the Lord in a way I had never felt before, deep within me. Yes, I thought, we're all kin through Jesus. Not just what we read about him in the Bible, but who he is. That's the secret to powerful faith, the power that I wanted to convey in my movie."

Then he goes on to say a little bit about the story itself: "[It's about] a good man but a flawed one—flawed as we all are. Called by God at the age of twelve, he becomes a respected minister with a rousing gift for charismatic preaching. But his family is torn apart by marital infidelity. In a dreadful moment of jealous rage he injures a man and runs. His flight becomes a journey toward a redeemed faith, a return to God's saving grace.

"Assuming a new identity, he starts a church deep in the Louisiana bayou. Again his gift for preaching sweeps up a congregation, returning faith to a town where it had lagged, but his own redemption can only come when he faces the truth of his transgressions."

Well, really quite an extraordinary movie and one that I would certainly recommend. It's been out for maybe twenty years now, but almost everything is available today in DVD.

People caught up fully in what they believe. People on fire for the Lord. Fires burning brightly.

There's fire mentioned also in our Old Testament reading from Exodus this morning. Moses is depicted out tending his sheep when suddenly a bush is engulfed by fire, though it does not burn down. And out of this blazing bush God calls to Moses and tells him that the cries of the

Israelites have been heard. Their prayers are being answered. God says that they will be delivered from the Egyptians and brought to a good place, a land "flowing with milk and honey." And further, Moses himself shall be the one to lead them.

Now I'm not sure how we can explain this burning bush. Scholars have tried to offer various theories over the years. The bush had leaves of some brilliant color and it just looked like it was aflame, or the leaves were semi-transparent to the intense sun and appeared to be on fire, or any number of other theories. But who really knows?

The truth is that the Hebrews lived in a world in which they expected supernatural appearances from time to time, and they simply explained these as divine manifestations. They weren't troubled when such events didn't have a scientific explanation; it probably didn't even occur to them to be concerned. The contradiction with natural order is more a problem for those of us of the modern world.

Whatever its explanation, I'm impressed by the fact that the bush in Exodus is not consumed by the fire. God speaks through the fire, but it is a fire that doesn't destroy like most fires do. And perhaps that's part of the meaning of this symbolism—that God is not in those things which consume, which destroy. Evil is not God's medium.

This means that God is not in the fires of war. God is not in the fires which inflame crosses on a new family's front yard. God is not in the fires of rage which abuse and injure people. God is not in the fires of addiction which burn up lives. God is not in any of these hell-fires which destroy.

But God is in the fire of self-giving love. God is in the fire of commitment to a holy cause. God is in the fire of righteous indignation whenever injustice is present. God is in the fire of compassion for those who are hungry. Perhaps in those "fires" the Spirit speaks to us today in much the same way as the blazing bush made known God's will and plans to Moses.

The Spirit of God is a powerful force, but ever a power for good. It is a power that can inspire and motivate as men and women open themselves to the leading of this presence in their lives. It can take us from the point of where we are to the point of where we would want to be.

Thirty years ago the Roman Catholic Church raised Katharine Drexel to sainthood. She was a Philadelphian who burned with a passion for the plight of Native Americans and African Americans. In her 96 years she founded more than 50 schools for Indian children in the West, then turned her attention to the South. Here she championed education for Black children and founded Xavier University of New Orleans as the first Catholic college in America for minorities.

Katherine Drexel chose the more difficult path for her life. She came from a wealthy family and could have lived a life of ease, but she burned inside with a desire to help others who were being denied their potential.

And while none of us may ever be made saints, we do saintly work when we're fired by the desire to help others who need us. That can take many forms—visiting with those who are sick, providing transportation, giving a listening ear, saying a word of encouragement, praying with those who have lost hope.

Those same “flames” of the Spirit are reflected in today’s reading from Acts. As with story of the bush, there’s no way of knowing just what those gathered disciples experienced on that day in Jerusalem; whatever it was, it was unlike anything they had ever known before. What we do know for certain is that the wind was understood to be a manifesting of the Spirit of God. It’s also clear that this occasion came to be regarded as a dividing line in history and marks the true beginning of the Christian Church.

At that time, in that place, God’s Spirit came upon those early followers with power. This wasn’t some gentle breeze which teases the hair; instead, it was like a storm front that just about knocked a person over. You couldn’t have been there and missed it, and you certainly couldn’t have slept through it. It shook the building and moved everything not nailed down.

Whatever it was, it couldn’t have happened at a more needed time. Jesus was no longer there with them. His followers were confused and uncertain. They knew what he had taught them, but it was as if they were immobilized. They had neither the strength nor direction to move ahead.

Still they held to the promise of Jesus: “When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” They may not have known what Jesus meant by this, but they were waiting with anticipation and hope for what was yet to come. Then came this day, and it was the time they had awaited.

Fire and wind, visible symbols of the unseen Spirit. This morning, the Birthday of the Church, we may not know what our ancestors in faith experienced on those occasions that were recorded in scripture, but it changed their lives forever. On this, the Birthday of the Church, today and here, it holds the promise to be as monumental for us even if it comes in a less dramatic way.