

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Tending the Holy Fire: Midway Spirituality”
Inspired by Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*.
a series on 2 Corinthians.
2 Corinthians 4:16-5:7
August 14, 2016

Moses is out tending his sheep, and you all know the story. It’s been a long time since his days back in Egypt. He came to the wilderness as a young man. Now his life has come to something he could have never imagined growing up in Pharaoh’s palace.

Moses is a shepherd. Day after day, year after year, he tends the sheep. It’s not exactly a pleasant job...

all alone for days on end,
sleeping on the hard ground,
the stink of the sheep always on him.

There’s nothing particularly glamorous, nothing meaningful, nothing inspiring about his work, but it gets the bills paid, and so he does it.

Of course, you know what happens. One day in the seemingly endless days of tending the sheep, Moses sees a fire. A bush was all aflame, but it wasn’t burning up. Obviously this wasn’t a normal kind of fire.

This was a Holy Fire. And so as he walks up to the holy fire, he becomes aware that this is holy ground. He takes off his shoes, and he begins to listen to the Holy Fire... It speaks to him, and he’s overcome with a profound reverence, a fear, an awe in this Holy Fire’s midst.

Moses hides his face... and this Holy Fire begins to call him to his great life’s work. Moses wrestles with his doubts, his fears, his questions, his past... But the Holy Fire keeps burning. It never burns up, the scripture says.

It’s burning and calling as Moses has to decide what to do with this Holy Fire, there before him, in his life.

It’s the same Holy Fire I think Paul is describing in our scripture today. He’s just using different images, different words to describe it. **“For in this tent, we groan, longing to be clothed ...”** Paul writes **“While we are still in this tent, this body, we groan...”** **for something that is beyond us. For the heavenly dwelling.**

This “groaning” this “longing” is another way of talking about the Holy Fire that is always burning in each of us. It’s there at the center of our lives, this fiery energy, that makes us restless... that creates within us a loneliness, a gnawing nostalgia.

There is a Holy Longing that lies at the center of human existence. There is a universal dis-ease in us. It's part of what it means to be alive.

Look around humanity. Look inside yourself and you know that
we are not at peace most of the time,
and only occasionally restless.
We're not living in a serenity day after day,
that is only rarely interrupted with desire.

No, it's really the other way around.
We live with desire/with longing,
that might find moments of serenity.
We live with a kind of restlessness,
that only occasionally finds rest.

Because at the very center of our beings, there is a Holy Fire, that never burns up.

And it's this Holy Fire that almost all art and poetry are trying to understand and express. It's this Holy Longing that is at the heart of all great literature, and poetry, and philosophy, and psychology, and religion. All of it is trying to name and understand this Holy Fire that is always burning in the center of our beings.

And that fire can have different faces, different moods to it.
Sometimes it looks like pain-
a frustration, a dissatisfaction, and aching.
But other times it might come as this deep energy –
as something beautiful, something pulling us toward love and creativity.

But it all comes from the same place, the same fire burning within us, or what Ronald Rolheiser calls, *Eros* – this erotic, electrical, powerful kind of energy always burning within us.

And what he says is that, what we do with that Energy, that Holy Fire, is what determines our spirituality.

This whole series from 2 Corinthians that we're in, I've coined "Midway Spirituality." But there is a lot of confusion out there about what spirituality actually is. That word "spirituality" conjures up all different kinds of images for different people. Depending on who you are, it might be something otherworldly or mystical. For some it's something churchy, for others something New Age. Sometimes the word "spiritual" sounds like the kind of thing that's just for the pious, or the saints among us. "They are spiritual," we tell ourselves.

So, "spirituality" becomes this thing on the fringes of life,
this thing that some people have and others don't.

But that's a fundamental misunderstanding of what Spirituality actually is. It's not something that's just for some people with a particular bent. It's not something on the edges of life. It's at the center of every life... no matter what you do or believe... because all of us have this same fiery-longing at the center of our existence.

Spirituality is simply what you do with this Holy Fire... what you do with that electric energy burning within you.

So the difference between one person and another person is not that one has a spirituality and the other doesn't. It's that some have a **life-giving spirituality**. And others have a **destructive spirituality**.

In other words, a Saint or a Spiritual Giant isn't someone who is in some category of being spiritual, while the rest of us are unspiritual. A Saint is simply someone who has learned to channel the Holy Fire in creative, life-giving ways... rather than in destructive, life-killing ways.

***Which is why tending the Holy Fire within us,
paying attention to our spirituality, is so critical.***

Midway down the road of life's journey, Moses encountered a burning bush, an unquenchable fire. A fire that I think he had known before, but it had gotten out of control, destroying his life, and bringing death to those around him.

You see, before he became a shepherd, while he was still living in Egypt as a young man, Moses saw how the Hebrew slaves were treated. And a Holy Fire of outrage, of justice, began to burn in him.

He thought he could wield his own fire to bring about justice... and so he let it begin to blaze in him. But this fire was stronger, was more dangerous than he realized.

One day he saw a Hebrew slave being beaten by an Egyptian master. He looked to make sure no one was around, and the fire leaped out of him, and he killed the Egyptian master, and buried his body in the sand.

At first he thought he got away with it. But he didn't realize that his burst of passionate outrage was like setting fire to the forest around him... a fire that was going to destroy him. Word of what he'd done got around, and Pharaoh put a price on his head.

That's the moment when Moses fled to the wilderness unsure of what would become of his life. And there he stayed. He met a girl. He took on a new life. A new identity. And there he stayed for years... giving up any work for justice, squelching his outrage, quenching that Holy Fire within him.

You see, he thought that running away from his home in Egypt, he could get away from that Holy Unrest in him. And it probably worked some at first. He becomes a simple shepherd... a nobody out there. I imagine there were a lot of years where he felt

dead out there with the sheep. The dis-ease would creep up, but he'd tamp it down because at least he was safe out there.

So, when that Holy Fire showed up in the bush, years and years later, calling him to go back... to be part of God's justice for the Hebrews, but in a way that looks all together different than it did to him before, you bet he was terrified.

This fire had gotten away from him before.

It had been life-destroying before.

What's to say it wouldn't again?

So, this time he doesn't take the Holy Fire so lightly. He takes off his shoes, and he covers his face in deep reverence and fear. And as it calls him to go back, he has to decide if he'll trust God with the Holy Longing in him or not. He has to decide if he will keep trying to pour water over the fire, if he's going to live numbed to the pain, or allow it to burn in him again.

Part of what is happening there at the bush is that Moses is realizing that this Holy Dis-ease, this Longing in him, the electric energy in him isn't supposed to be completely quenched any more than it should be allowed to run wild.

He's learning that the Holy Fire can also be channeled in creative life-giving ways. He's learning that there is a tension here.

It's that same tension that the church is still wrestling with today. It's a tension that we have struggled with in our history, and continues to confuse in our time.

The desires, the longing, the energies within us are good and holy. They are given to us by God. And throughout our history we've known that we must be careful with them. We've had this kind of reverence for them.

At times, that fear has driven us into the wilderness where we've tried to completely squelch them. At times, in our history, we've made them taboo, or we've tried to put them out. We've called them sin. And it's taken us to a desolate place, with no life. It's in those times that we've forgotten that the Energy, the Eros, the Electricity within us is sacred and from God.

But in our time, we have this tendency to go to the other extreme. We've remembered that the Holy Longing, the Energy, the Electricity within us is holy and from God. But we've forgotten to have any reverence for it. We've forgotten how powerful and destructive it can be when we aren't careful.

And so, we begin to act like anything is permissible. That it doesn't matter what we do with our desire and our longing. And we let it loose in our lives in a flippant kind of way... We've defaulted to a permissive, follow your heart, do what feels good, anything goes morality.

And then, we are surprised when the fire... gets out of control.... and people get burned... and our souls are wounded. And just like Moses who thought he could bury his actions in the sand and leave them behind, we're surprised when they haunt us in the present... and threaten our future.

You see, when we begin to flippantly throw out all the teachings and guidelines and moralities of our great tradition because we assume we're more enlightened, so we can do what we want: then there's a good chance that what we do with our Holy Longings will begin to destroy us.

Sure, we've gotten some things terribly wrong along the way. Some things do need to be re-thought. Some things need to be let go of along the way. But that must be done with awe and reverence for the power of the Holy within us.

It must be done prayerfully, not flippantly...

It must be done with love for our neighbor, not lust for ourselves.

It must be done in such a way that we remember that: ***the great gift of the traditions of our faith, is that we are given guides, and practices, and boundaries that help us channel the Holy Fire in a way that doesn't destroy us, but creates life, and makes us whole.***

It's this grounding that guides us into a healthy spirituality, one where the fire within continues to burn, filling us with life... without being set loose, destroying life.

This is why, paying attention to our spirituality is so important. We have to continue to ***tend the Fire*** within us...

so that on one hand

it continues to burn, keeping fire and life in our veins,

but on the other hand

it doesn't burn out of control, ripping our life apart.

Rolheiser describes it this way. **"If we do things which keep us [both] energized & integrated, [both] on fire and yet glued together, we have a healthy spirituality.**

"[But if our yearning, our holy longing, drives us into actions which harden [or deaden] our insides or cause us to fall apart and die, we have an unhealthy spirituality."¹

Of course, the reality is that none of us holds that tension just right all the time. And how that looks changes from one season of life to another. There are seasons when life seems to pour water on that Holy Fire, and seasons when it becomes explosive within us.

¹ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*, 18.

But if you're paying attention, if you're watching, then Midway down the road of life's journey...you might just look over and notice a bush that is still burning, but will not burn up.

And by God's grace you'll go tend to that fire. And as you do, just like Moses did, you'll hear the Holy Fire calling you back home.

Augustine has this beautiful line at the beginning of his *Confessions*, where he writes, **"You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless, until they find rest in you."**

That's what this holy longing is ultimately given to you for.
And it's why it matters so much what we do with it.
All things that stoke or douse the Fire are part of your spirituality,
And your spirituality is there, ultimately, to help you find your way back home in God.

That's how Paul talks about the groaning in this letter to the Corinthians. That's how he describes the longing we have in our lives. **"We groan,"** he writes, **"because we wish to be clothed" [with our heavenly dwelling] ...to be clothed with God's presence so that we might be "swallowed up by life."**

Dayspring, my hope for you is that you might be swallowed up in life. So be mindful to always tend the Holy Fire within you.

May it never be quenched, but never tear you apart... always burning, but never burning you up.

May the Holy Longing in you fill you with creative energy, with delight, and wonder.

So that, you might know life everlasting.

Amen.

Reflection

*I have been torn between the times, the order of which I do not know, and my
thoughts, even the inmost and deepest places of my soul,
are mangled by various commotions
until I shall flow together into Thee,
purged and molten in the fire of thy love.*

- Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*